

Sylvia Pankhurst, whose little-known progression from suffragism to communism is related in the Introduction to this pamphlet, wrote 'Communism And Its Tactics' in the winter of 1921-22, following her expulsion from the CPGB. Her distinctive treatment of the basic controversies of communist strategy makes this a text worthy of a wider audience and reconsideration among socialists still debating the same issues today.

SYLVIA PANKHURST
C O M M U N I S M
A N D I T S
T A C T I C S



Edited & Introduced
By Mark A. S. Shipway

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

'Communism And Its Tactics' was first published as a series of articles in the following issues of the Workers' Dreadnought:

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March 3, 10.

The text published here is based on the 1921-1922 version. Some repetitions, elaborations, and examples, which added too little to the weight of the core of the argument to merit inclusion, have been edited out; the text presented here is thus approximately three-quarters of the length of the original. All footnotes have been added to the text by the present editor.

This pamphlet is published by:

Mark Shipway
12, Hillpark Road
Edinburgh
EH4 7AN.

(correspondence only)

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SYLVIA PANKHURST, 1917-1924: AN INTRODUCTION

If Sylvia Pankhurst is best remembered for her part in the Votes For Women campaign, little in her political activity before 1917 would contradict such a memory. From 1917 onwards, however, her ideas and activity began to follow a quite different direction. One catalyst in this evolution was the first World War. The suffrage issue took second place to social work aimed at alleviating the continually accumulating privations and suffering caused by the War. Furthermore, the idea that through the vote people could control the government and thus their own lives was undermined by the wartime conduct of affairs, which largely bypassed the normal channels of government and paid little heed to the wishes of the people. Pankhurst was propelled further along these new paths of thought by a second catalyst, the 1917 events in Russia, which held out the prospect of, firstly, a completely new form of society which would end suffering once and for all (communism), and, secondly, a means, other than parliamentarism, of bringing about that society (workers' councils, or 'soviets').

At its annual conference in May 1917 Pankhurst's organisation, the Workers' Suffrage Federation (WSF), had adopted a programme containing socialist elements alongside its usual suffrage demands, and also voted to change the name of its newspaper (which Pankhurst edited) from the Womans Dreadnought to the Workers Dreadnought. A growing interest in socialism was also reflected in Pankhurst's attendance at the Leeds Soviet Convention in June 1917. That this Convention eventually came to nothing was due largely to the participation of reformist leaders of the labour movement who hailed the February revolution in Russia as sweeping away obstacles to more efficient prosecution of the Russian War effort, rather than as a prelude to a second, socialist, revolution. When this second revolution did come, in October 1917, Pankhurst immediately hailed it as a revolution putting the working class in a position of state power from where it could begin to initiate a socialist reconstruction of society.

Revolution elsewhere in Europe and the immediate establishment of socialism now seemed, to Pankhurst, an imminent, practical, possibility, and she began to drop her reformist

demands for palliation of the capitalist system in favour of concerted propaganda for nothing less than socialism. Parliamentarism was also dropped. When the Bolsheviks failed to win a majority in the elections to the Russian Constituent Assembly and subsequently decreed its dissolution (January 1918) Pankhurst supported their actions, arguing that the parliamentary system would be unable to cope with the task of establishing socialism, and that the Soviet system (committees of mandated, revocable workers' delegates) was far more democratic than any parliament.

The evolution of the WSF continued when the 1918 annual conference voted to change the organisation's name to the Workers' Socialist Federation, and in July 1918 the slogan 'Socialism, Internationalism, Votes For All' was dropped from the Dreadnought's masthead and replaced with 'For International Socialism'. At the General Election of December 1918 Pankhurst turned down the offer of a parliamentary candidature for the Hallam division of Sheffield and campaigned instead for the abolition of capitalist parliaments and the establishment of Councils of Workers' Delegates.

In March 1919 the Third (Communist) International was founded in Moscow by the Bolsheviks, and a courier from the International attended the WSF's 1919 conference with the recommendation that a Communist Party should be established in Britain. The WSF thus voted to change its name once more, this time to The Communist Party, and the Executive Committee was instructed to take steps towards linking up with the Third International and other communist groups in Britain. Soon afterwards, however, the Executive recommended that the new title be dropped in case it prejudiced negotiations with other groups, and so the old name (WSF) was restored. Nevertheless, these two impulses, towards national and international unity, remained important determinants of Pankhurst's activity in the following months. Between October 1919 and February 1920 she travelled to Bologna for the annual conference of the Italian Socialist Party, to Berlin for a meeting which set up the West European Secretariat of the Third International, and to Amsterdam for the first meeting of the West European Sub-Bureau of the International.

At the same time Pankhurst was clarifying her own political programme: in favour of the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of communism, the class struggle, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the soviet system, and affiliation to the Third International. While most of the

socialist groups in Britain agreed on these points, two others in Pankhurst's programme, refusal to engage in parliamentary action and opposition to affiliation to the Labour Party, were proving to be stumbling blocks to communist unity in Britain. Of the three other groups participating in the unity talks, the South Wales Socialist Society agreed with the WSF, the Socialist Labour Party opposed Labour Party affiliation but supported parliamentary action, while the British Socialist Party, by far the largest of the participant groups, favoured both affiliation and parliamentarism. Fearing that a party uniting these groups would prove too right-wing, Pankhurst initiated the formation of the Communist Party (British Section of the Third International) on a platform of no affiliation and no parliamentarism, with the support of the WSF and seven other communist groups at a conference in London on 19 June 1920. Pankhurst's action appeared to be vindicated when the BSP and part of the SLP became the Communist Party of Great Britain on August 1st 1920, adopting 'right-wing' policies in favour of affiliation and parliamentary action.

The Third International, however, did not look favourably upon Pankhurst's policies. In April 1920 Lenin had completed his pamphlet, "Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder, which polemicised against Pankhurst and laid down the policies of affiliation and parliamentarism as the correct ones for British communists to follow. Pankhurst travelled to Moscow for the Second Congress of the Third International in July/August 1920 determined to change Lenin's mind, but to no avail; the Bolshevik leader's policies were accepted by a majority of the Congress and thus adopted as binding policies of the International. The CP(BSTI) now faced a choice between adherence to its communist principles or continued participation in the mainstream of the international communist movement. After much internal acrimony, and the resignation of one third of its membership, the 200 communists organised in its four Manchester branches, the CP(BSTI) chose the latter course of action, and entered the CPGB at the Leeds Unity Convention in January 1921. Because of her imprisonment on a sedition conviction in January 1921, Pankhurst's part in the final unity negotiations consisted only of a recommendation that the CP(BSTI) enter the CPGB as an opposition group determined to win the party over to left-wing policies. Released from prison in May 1921, Pankhurst pursued this path vigorously - but too vigorously, in fact,

for the liking of the CPGB leadership, which expelled her from the party in September 1921 following her repeated forthright condemnations of CPGB and Comintern policies.

During the winter of 1921-22 Pankhurst proceeded to link up with those elements in the international communist movement with which she had sided during her debates in Moscow in 1920, and which had also split from, or been forced out of, the mainstream of the movement - notably the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD) led by the Dutch communist Herman Gorter. Pankhurst had previously published many articles by Gorter and the KAPD in the Dreadnought. In October 1921 the Dreadnought announced its adherence to the Fourth (Communist Workers') International which had been formed on the initiative of the KAPD, and in February 1922 announced the formation of a Communist Workers' Party in Britain. The CWP's policies were: to overthrow capitalism and establish communism; to spread knowledge of communist ideas; to abstain from parliamentary action; to refuse affiliation to the Labour Party; to emancipate the workers from reformist Trade Unions; and to organise 'One Big Union', which would be a forerunner of the workers' councils. The first step towards this last objective was taken in September 1922 with the establishment of the All-Workers Revolutionary Union of Workshop Committees.

With the recession of the revolutionary upsurge of 1918-21 the communists grouped around the Workers' Dreadnought were one of the few groups which struggled to keep alive uncompromisingly communist principles: against the triumph of state-capitalism in Russia and the reformist, counter-revolutionary consequences for the policies of the Communist International and the Communist Party of Great Britain, against the nationalist, pro-war sentiments whipped up by the bourgeoisie during the international crises of 1923-24, and against the false expectations raised by the election of the first Labour Government in December 1923. Isolated from the working class by the capitalist and state-capitalist counter-revolution, however, the Dreadnought reached the verge of bankruptcy on several occasions, and finally failed to appear after the issue of 14 June 1924.

Mark Shipway
Edinburgh
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COMMUNIST SOCIETY

Under Communism all shall satisfy their material needs without stint or measure from the common storehouse, according to their desires. Everyone will be able to have what he or she desires. The abundant production now possible, and which invention will constantly facilitate, will remove any need for rationing or limiting of consumption.

Every individual, relying on the great common production, will be secure from material want and anxiety.

There will be no class distinctions, since these arise from differences in material possessions, education and social status. All such distinctions will be swept away.

There will be neither rich nor poor. Money will no longer exist, and no-one will desire to hoard commodities not in use, since a fresh supply may be obtained at will. There will be no selling, because there will be no buyers, since everybody will be able to obtain everything at will, without payment.

The possession of private property, beyond that which is in actual personal use, will disappear.

There will be neither masters nor servants, all being in a position of economic equality. No individual will be able to become the employer of another.

All children will be educated up to adult age, and all adults will be able to make free, unstinted use of all educational facilities in their abundant leisure.

Stealing, forgery, burglary, and all economic crimes will disappear, with all the objectionable apparatus for preventing, detecting and punishing them.

Prostitution will become extinct; it is a commercial transaction, dependent upon the economic need of the prostitute and the customer's power to pay.

Sexual union will no longer be based upon material conditions, but will be freely contracted on the basis of affection and mutual attraction.

The birth of children will cease to be prevented by reason of poverty.

Material anxiety being removed, and the race for wealth eliminated, other objects and ambitions will take the place of the personal struggle for individual material existence; since all will benefit from the labour of all, honour will be done, not to the wealthy, as at present, but to those